



Natomas Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Laurie Patching

discussing the **Virgin Sturgeon**

October 10, 2009

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This is not a verbatim transcript. Parts of the interview have been paraphrased.

Anne: The day is October 10, 2009. Randee Tavarez and I, Anne Ofsink, are in my home and we are enjoying the company of the woman, Laurie Patching, who co-owned the Virgin Sturgeon when it first opened. So we're going to be talking about that today. Here we go. We're going to talk a little bit about what the story is, about the beginning of the Virgin Sturgeon. So, Laurie, give us some idea about how everything started.

[00:00:55]

Laurie: I was working for the California legislature and kind of getting tired of what I was doing and wanting a change. I had a girlfriend and we would go to antique auctions and buy antiques. They would have containers come in from Europe and we would buy antiques for practically nothing. This was in the early '70s. We were filling our houses with these antiques and we thought, well, let's open up a little shop down in Midtown. We thought that would be a good idea because we could continue our jobs and work on the weekends in our shop and maybe get someone to run it for us during the week. So I'm over at her house one Saturday and we're going through the *Sacramento Bee* classified ads to find a storefront in Midtown. And instead, I find a river marina for sale. I said, oh, wouldn't this be fun!

I was raised in Sacramento and my family always spent the summers on the river. We learned to water ski up and down the river and had barbeques. So, we went and looked at this place. At that time, it was called Bob and Dee's Place. I got real interested and I thought it would be a lot of fun. I went back to the office at the legislature and told my friends about it. I had one guy who worked with me, I didn't know him on a social basis, who said, "If you need a partner, I would love to do that. I love to fish and I love to be on the river." I said, ok, but my girlfriend and I were going to do this. Next thing you know, a few days later someone said, "Jack Johnson over in the Speaker's office, he's interested in that also, he'd love to be a partner." I thought, ok, I don't know Jack Johnson, but ok. Then my girlfriend's husband said to my girlfriend, "You can't get involved in this, you don't know anything about running a marina. What are you thinking? You can't do that." Next thing you know, I have John Cox and Jack Johnson as my partners.

[00:03:17]

Anne: Wonderful! That's very fun. Now, I'm going to bring us back a moment before we go forward, in that you were telling us what the name of it was when you purchased it, but then you also knew what it was prior to that.

Laurie: Yes, originally, this was an old rock barge that they used to haul rocks up the river when they were building the levee, and I think this was down in the Bay Area originally. It was an 80-year-old barge when we bought it. It was called JoJo's Marina originally. A young woman by the name of JoJo, her uncle bought it for her and brought it up, and they started a beer and wine and hamburger place. She got married and moved off, they sold the place, and it was soon called Dirty Harry's. I don't know what happened to Harry, but he sold it to Bob and Dee. Bob and Dee called it Bob and Dee's Place. When we bought it, we didn't know what to name it. We talked to people who worked in the legislature and to all our friends about how we'd bought a marina called Bob and Dee's Place, what are some good names? So, everybody would go after work and have a cocktail across the street, and we'd say, we've got to come up with a name for the barge.

Anne: So, you were sitting where? Like at Posey's?

[00:05:20]

Laurie: It was where the big hotel — David's Brass Rail. So people would go to David's Brass Rail. And on a cocktail napkin, came up with the Do Barge Inn, the Golden Rivet, the Albatross, the Virgin Sturgeon — anyway, they had a list of several other names. We picked two: the Albatross and the Virgin Sturgeon. And then, the democratic people that we are, we went around and said, "What do you vote for?" The Virgin Sturgeon won hands down, so it was no problem. Except for Jack Johnson's wife had a little bit of a problem with the "virgin" part of it. Anyway, that's how the name came about.

Anne: So then, this was in what year?

Laurie: 1976. Actually, I think it was May 1, 1976, that we took it over and opened the doors. None of us had been in business before so it was a fun thing. We continued to work our jobs at the Legislature. I had more energy at that time than I've ever had. I would go to work, come home at 5 o'clock, change my clothes, go down to the river, be there by 6 o'clock, and work until midnight, or whatever. Sometimes I'd come home and even clean my house. It was because I was stimulated. I was just loving it. We spent weekends working down there. A fellow I had gone to grammar school with and his buddy managed the place during the day.

[00:07:25]

Anne: Oh, that's great. And so, were you able, when you went down there and purchased it — you just took over because it was already open, and you just changed the name? There wasn't a closure period?

Laurie: Well, yes, in fact it was a quick closure. We were down there one evening, and Bob and Dee said, tomorrow night is going to be our last night and then it's yours. We were surprised that everything closed so quickly. We did have to go through the health department to get permitted and changed, and get the beer and wine license changed. They were cleaning things up — Bob and Dee — and they painted the kitchen, all the stainless steel, and we had to scrape it all because of the health department. So, it was a switchover, and we just opened as soon as we got all the permits done.

Anne: So then you were going to do food?

Laurie: Yeah, we had a limited menu — just burgers and fries and salmon, and a steak sandwich, and a chef salad — so that all of us could go in the kitchen and do it. We had friends that helped us. We became very popular. Jerry Brown was governor and all the "Brownies" [Governor's staff] hung out there, and the governor, and so it became very popular. Gray Davis was Jerry Brown's chief of staff, and he was down there playing one of the first Pong machines. They were having Pong tournaments, and the governor called asking for Gray. I told him, "Gray, the governor's on the phone." He waved me away, and I had to tell the governor that he'd call him back.

[00:10:26]

Anne: So what was the next era?

Laurie: We were continuing operating it and working our jobs. That was 1976. We knew the barge was old and had unique problems. It had sunk four or five times before we bought it. We had five bilge pumps going all the time because it was taking in water. Our idea was to replace the old barge as soon as we could, as we knew the barge would probably not last too long. Well, it was a Friday, two days

short of our second anniversary party, April 28, 1978. We were stocked with more food, beer, and wine than we'd ever had. Three bands were scheduled to play on Sunday for the anniversary party. We started having music at the Virgin Sturgeon the first year, six nights a week. Groups would come down and play for food and drink. Robert Cray Band started at the Virgin Sturgeon.

Anne: We talked to Debi Randel, and didn't you allow her to have a birthday party a day or two prior to this? You were all stocked up planning this party.

Laurie: I don't remember that.

[00:13:03]

Anne: So anyway, you were anticipating this big second anniversary party. So then what happened?

Laurie: We had some live-aboards, people who lived aboard their houseboats on the docks, and we had a manager also at that time. And I guess she went to work, and called and said, "The barge is down. The barge is sunk." This is two days before our big celebration. We got the same divers that had raised it before. They dived with rolls of visqueen, then stapled it under and on the sides of the barge, like a diaper. We cut a hole in the back deck and built a coffer dam where we put a big irrigation pump to pump out the water. And we pumped and pumped and nothing happened. The divers found a split in the side of the barge that was ten feet long and two feet wide. A tree had come down the river at high water and punctured the side of the barge. So, we realized it was down for the last time. We salvaged everything off it that we could. The beer boxes, equipment, tables — in fact, we still have one of the tables from the original barge. We steam-cleaned it all and converted the shed into a beer and wine bar. We rented a trailer where we cooked burgers and fries, rented porta-potties, put up a parachute and operated on the levee. We continued to have music and served beer and wine. People continued to come to the Virgin Sturgeon now on the levee. We made the most of what we had and it was fun. We were keeping the spirit of the Virgin Sturgeon alive until we were able to find another barge. Upriver was the B&B Marina and the Village Marina, who both started having live music. It became an area for people to come from Sacramento to enjoy the river, which was really just five minutes from downtown Sacramento.

[00:17:24]

Anne: But I bet it was also a place for people to come on their boats from the city. Now do you have photos of that when you're up on the land, also?

Laurie: We used to get a lot of boaters from the Delta and overnight guest dockage, which is hard to find.

Anne: So, you were without a river restaurant at that point. You were on the levee.

Laurie: Right, we were on the levee, and we went barge shopping. It was the three of us, John, and Jack and I. And where do you go if you want to buy a barge? Joe Alioto at that time had just closed down his company, Pacific Far East Lines, in San Francisco. It was a shipping company. He had all these barges that were in bankruptcy. We went to San Francisco and there were all these barges tied together, all lined up, and we were jumping from one to another. We tried to go through the bankruptcy procedure to make an offer on one of the barges, but it wasn't happening. The procedure just takes too long. In the meantime, the Sacramento Yacht Club headquarters was on an old navy barracks barge, 110 feet long and 33 feet wide, the same size as the old barge, and it had a two-story super-structure on it. We heard

that the San Rafael Yacht Club bought it from the Sacramento Yacht Club, but they needed five different permits to move it to Marin County. They were unable to get all the permits to move it, so they wanted to sell it. We went and looked at the barge and started negotiating with them to buy it. This was in the fall of 1978. And during negotiations, the barge sank.

Anne: Oh no!

[00:21:02]

Laurie: What happened was that the barge was tied too tight to the shore. It didn't have enough movement. It has to float up and down when there's high water — there can be as much as a 28-foot difference between high and low water and it has to be able to fluctuate. The Yacht Club barge was tied too tight and it started raining. The river was coming up and it couldn't move. It also was a wood barge that has dry wood above the water line leaving spaces between the wood. As the water rose, it started coming in through the spaces and filled the hull with water. It took on too much water and sank. The barge was still on the Sacramento Yacht Club's property in West Sacramento. The San Rafael Yacht Club made attempts to raise the barge but failed. My partner Jack Johnson said, "We can raise that barge, I know we can." I thought, "Ok, if you think so." If it couldn't be raised, the Army Corp of Engineers requires you to take it out piece by piece. That would cost at least \$6,000 at that time. We had some experience with this, as we had had to take out the one that sank on our property. We had to get a barge with a clam shell on it to remove it piece by piece. That was when we were able to see the big tree that had punctured the side of it. Jack Johnson said, "We can raise that barge," so we negotiated and ended up buying it for a dollar. We took responsibility and would have had to pay the cost of removing it if we couldn't raise it. We were down there Thanksgiving Day, in wet suits — I was in a wet suit. We bought big boxes full of rags from the Salvation Army and went down into the bilge and we got huge pumps, irrigation pumps. For one, we had to cut a hole in the floor of the barge about this big because it was a huge, huge pump — I think it pumped 2,000 gallons of water a minute. But then we had to rent other pumps that we put in different places. Then we started the pumps up and I went down into the bilge and was shoving the rags into all the crevices, and in an hour and twenty minutes, we raised it. It came right up out of the water

Anne: Oh wow! That's something. And they were thinking, "And we only charged them a dollar?!"

[00:25:08]

Laurie: So we raised it. And then we got prepared to move it, and we moved it New Year's Day 1979. We had a boat that was a landing craft — some guy had it at the dock and he didn't pay dockage, so he just signed it over to us. We had these friends that were like "MacGyver" guys and they turned this boat into a salvage boat on the river, and they were able to raise boats and they were divers, and so they said, "We'll get this boat ready and then we'll tow the Yacht Club barge up." It's cold, there's ice on the docks on New Year's Day, and they're working their till midnight the night before because we decided we were going to move the barge. So anyway, we came downriver to get it, and we hooked onto it — I have a lot of pictures of moving the barge — and we brought it up to the Virgin Sturgeon location, and they parked that barge just like they parked the third barge, like they were parking a car. Which is amazing, because you have all the current and everything to deal with, and they just brought it up.

Anne: Quite some New Year's.

Laurie: Yes. Then we were working on getting some financing to get this place remodeled as a restaurant and bar. We had people who were interested in a limited partnership, a joint venture, people

from the legislature. They saw how popular it was. So we had a cocktail party and we got a lot of commitments from a lot of people. Then, a week after that happened, the barge caught fire. It was the 4th or 5th of May.

[00:28:16]

Anne: So now, what was there to catch fire? There had been this two-story super-structure on top of this barge. Was it usable?

Laurie: The first floor of it — the barge was 110 feet long, 33 feet wide. We were going to put the kitchen and the restaurant down there on the first floor. It was a navy barracks barge, so downstairs there was sleeping quarters, but it hadn't been a navy barracks barge for a long time because the Sacramento Yacht Club had it. But upstairs, what they had was a nice bar. It had oak hardwood floors, a beautiful bar, fireplace, piano. And upstairs was all set to go for the entertainment area for the bar, and downstairs we were going to put in the kitchen and seating area. So, that's what burned.

[00:30:30]

Randee: And that was an arson fire? Somebody didn't like you being there?

Laurie: Yeah. I think maybe they didn't like us being there.

Anne: So, we were hearing stories about the pirate, and there were all these stories about Captain Jim not wanting you to be there. But some of these pieces never fall in place and always remain a mystery.

Laurie: Captain Jim did some work for us. He made us these beautiful tables. He had some issues, and there was a threat by him, but unless you catch somebody doing something, you have no idea.

Anne: Randee you need to go, you're saying? *[Tape stops, then restarts]* Here we go, we're picking up again where we left off, at the fire. What went on then, Laurie?

Laurie: After the fire, that barge was no longer any good. So, the thought of building on that barge was not an option. That barge had too much damage. It burned down to the barge. So, the next thing was, we still want to be on the river.

[00:32:40]

Anne: Now you had all these new investors? Or did they back out after the fire?

Laurie: We had papers drawn up, but no one had given us any money. So we had commitments, but it wasn't a done deal. Jack Johnson and I bought out John Cox from the Virgin Sturgeon Corporation, so then it was Jack Johnson and me, and we were going to still try to get back onto the river. We still had the dock and the lease on the property. So we both got in the liquor lottery, I think that was in September of 1979, and I got drawn for a license. There were 16 names drawn for Sacramento County and I was number 16 to be drawn — so that was pretty exciting. They only give you about six months with a possible extension to nine months to get a place with a lease and get open and use the license. We knew we were not going to be able to get anything done at the river in that short of time. So, we went looking in the Midtown area of Sacramento to lease a place and found a place called Alexis on Broadway. It was right across from Broadway Bait and Tackle at 17th and Broadway. We got a lease for that, did some fixing up and remodeling, and we opened in the spring of 1980. The business did very

well. Unfortunately, Jack had heart attack six weeks after we opened and he passed away. I operated the Sturgeon II, but I still wanted to get back to the river.

[00:35:37]

Meanwhile, that barge that the fire was on sank on me several times, but I learned how to raise barges. I'd get pumps from U.S. Rentals, and I had the whole thing down. I had a friend of mine that helped me. We must have raised that barge four or five times. It wouldn't go all the way down — it'd start going down, and then we'd raise it.

I got in the liquor lottery again. The Sturgeon II was doing good, but I still wanted to open on the river. I got another lottery license. That time, there were nine licenses and I was number nine to be chosen. Always the last one! So that got me going on looking for another barge. I found the barge that we have now in Sutter County at Rio Ramaza Marina. It was called *Le Barge*. Downstairs was just storage. This was one of the barges that Joe Alioto had. It was made out of fiberglass — honeycomb fiberglass. It's very thick, about 12" thick on the front side and the stern side, and the walls are a good 8" thick. Very well-made barges, and this is one that came from San Francisco. At that time, there were a lot of these barges around and some fellows at Rio Ramaza opened it up as a little place and operated it, but they never had a gangway to get to it. They wanted to sell it and I ended up buying it. *[Looking at photo]* Here's where we're towing it upriver.

Anne: I see that photo. A little tugboat or something.

Laurie: This was an army gunboat. A friend of mine — he was in the tugboat business. He had two tugs that came up and he helped me tremendously. And his friend John Gustafson — *[referring to photo]* this guy here — he was an engineer that came down from Seattle and he engineered the gangway, working with the engineer here in Sacramento, and came up with how we were going to attach the jetway.

[00:38:50]

Anne: That's a whole other story! So you are bringing the *Le Barge* up, and then got it in place, and you had previous information about them [the previous owners] not making it because there was no way to get from land to get to the barge itself, so you started thinking then about not wanting yours to be like that?

Laurie: Well, there was no way that you could. With the other barges, we had a gangway, of course, to get from the Garden Highway, from the levee, onto the barge. But these guys that had *Le Barge*, I think it was kind of a clubhouse, it wasn't really open to the public, and maybe they were thinking about sometime opening it. I don't think it was ever open to the public.

Anne: And they wouldn't have had the traffic — up in Verona? There's not near the traffic that we have here in Sacramento on the rivers. So now we're into 19—

[00:40:21]

Laurie: Yeah. So now we're into 1982. I bought the barge. I applied for a small business loan. I bought the barge and moved it to the location of the Virgin Sturgeon, I think in the spring of 1982, and started working on getting a gangway to it and painting it and fixing it up. The gangway — I had contracted with somebody to have a gangway built from the levee to the barge, and I'd even given them a deposit. Then my friend Kay Vell, who's in the barge business and has tugboats, he said, "You get one of those, if that barge moves at all, it could tweak the gangway. You need something strong and heavy." So, I met him at

San Francisco airport and looking at old jetways. They put them to rest after so many years, so they have a graveyard of the jetways. A couple weeks afterwards, he called and said, "Pan Am is getting rid of one tomorrow. You have to make up your mind if you want it or not because I have this guy that works here at the airport and he can put it on a flatbed and all you would have to do is get a crane up there in Sacramento and have it taken off the flatbed and just put it on the levee. They will give it to you. All you would have to do is pay for having the crane there." I said yes.

[00:42:59]

So this is the crane taking it off the flatbed [*referring to photo*] and then they put it on the levee. It's big and it's heavy, and we don't know how much it weighs because they didn't go through the scales on the way up. But we had to take that into consideration for putting it on the barge. So John Gustafson came down from Seattle and started thinking about engineering and got together with the engineer here in Sacramento. It was a big deal getting that gangway done because we had to put it through a stress test. The county required us to put it through a stress test. Two hundred pounds per square inch is what I think it had to hold. So we had it on the levee, and we put it up on house jacks — crib stacks — and so it was like it was suspended, and then we had to fill it with something or somehow figure out how to get 200 pounds per square inch in it. We thought, how about filling it with water, or bodies, you know how people used to shove themselves into phone booths? What we ended up doing was lining it with some thick rubber flooring, so it wouldn't ruin it, and then we got I don't know how many yards of sand delivered and we filled it with sand three-quarters of the way up. I forget how many tons of sand it needed to have to meet the requirement of 200 pounds per square inch. We rented a little Bobcat loader and wore gas masks because of all the fumes in the gangway, and we loaded it, and the guy's out there from the county and he's got his little surveyor's deal and he's looking through and it deflected a quarter of an inch and that was it. He says, "Ok, that's fine." Then we had to take all the sand out. I think that was in February of 1983. [*Referring to photo*] This is them putting the gangway, holding it there. It was quite a feat to get that on the barge.

[00:46:07]

Anne: Where did the sand go?

Laurie: Well, the sand is in the corner. We put it all in polypropylene bags that wouldn't fall apart — they use those a lot when you have floods on the river. So, we had to put them underneath the deck up here on the corner of the barge — the far end, what would be the downriver outside corner of the barge — under the deck, and under the flooring downstairs, to be ballast for the gangway. The gangway weighed so much that when you put it on that corner, it would've tipped. So we filled the whole side of that, and that was an experience just getting those sandbags down there — I mean, they were 80 pounds apiece.

[*Tape cuts out, then starts up again.*]

Anne: So, you get the gangway in place and get the sandbags where they needed to be in the new restaurant. What an endeavor. And you were just the single owner at this time, right?

Laurie: Yeah. So, we had it painted before it was put into place. It had to be done up on the levee, all the painting of it. Here it is [*referring to photo*] — that's probably when it was painted.

Anne: Oh, look at that. "The Virgin Sturgeon" with the big old fish on it. "Cocktails."

Laurie: So then it was put into place.

Anne: Quite a feat.

[00:48:00]

Laurie: It was quite a feat getting that into place. Then, again with this liquor license, ABC was very good dealing with me, because things took a lot longer to get accomplished there. And then a fire suppression system — we needed one because there was no fire hydrants out there at that time. There is now. We just got one put in last year. But, otherwise, there was no water out there. The Virgin Sturgeon operates on a well — a very good well. Here's the suppression system here [*referring to photo*]. It all runs off a generator — well, the generator keeps the pressure in all the lines. And that's a big irrigation pump. This is the engineer that designed it — he's just a character. But it's quite a system, also. It would run all the water down through fire hydrants on the dock. But at all times, there has to be pressure in that line, and if you opened up one of the hoses, the pressure would drop, and the generator would kick on automatically, and the generator would power so you have 1,500 gallons of water a minute. We did the calculations, and that could sink the barge in eight minutes! So, if you have a fire and you open up this system and you have all that water spraying — if there was a fire on the barge, it could sink.

Anne: Oh my land! The restaurant wasn't opened yet, right? Because you were getting the barge in place and getting all the painting done. So how long after you got the gangway in place, and the fire suppression system—

[00:50:20]

Laurie: It was August 10, 1984, that we opened.

Anne: So, you were saying, then, that from 1978 to 1984, you had no place on the river, but you still had the Sturgeon II on Broadway.

Laurie: We had a lease on the property on the Garden Highway where the Virgin Sturgeon is, and we continued to rent out docking space. So it opened in '84 and this is the third barge. And it's a very good barge, very seaworthy, no problems. And we've been operating it ever since. [*Knocks on wood*]

Anne: That is so good. So now, we've come to the end of our brief little list of things we wanted to touch base about. I'm wondering — you then turned over the ownership of the Virgin Sturgeon when?

Laurie: March 22, 2007.

Anne: So for two years now, Bob Riggs and his wife [Renee] have been running the Sturgeon. And you mentioned earlier that somewhere in this course of time, you purchased the Boatworks across the street. You were talking about how you were so invested in time and money in the Virgin Sturgeon, so what if they decided not to allow people to park on the river road? So, tell us a little about that.

[00:52:27]

Laurie: Yeah, it was my concern because the city and county brought up several times — and the residents out on Garden Highway — about parking with Riverbank going in there. The Virgin Sturgeon was out there by itself for a long time, and then you have Riverbank with three restaurants and different businesses. I was concerned that if they took parking off the Garden Highway then there would be no

Virgin Sturgeon. So I bought the Boatworks, which is across the street from the Virgin Sturgeon, as a safety factor in case I needed it for parking.

Anne: So, what was the Boatworks before you took it?

Laurie: Well, the Boatworks has been a boat storage and RV storage facility, indoor and outdoor. It was first built, I believe, in the early '30s, and it was a hay barn. They used to stack hay inside of the building there. I don't know how long it operated.

Anne: What I'm also remembering, if I'm correct, when we've done one of our annual Natomas tours, it seems to me that Donalda, who's a Vargas now but was a Silva, used to talk about going in there because it was always so cool, where the hay was. I think that is a story that she mentioned, that this used to be where they stored hay when she was a girl.

Laurie: It's got huge, tall ceilings. And they had a conveyer, like a run with the rails, that they would use to lift the bales, where they could run them down the whole length of the building and stack them. And that's still there. But, it's been a very good business operating the way that it is. I've had it since 1989.

[00:57:35]

Anne: This has been great. What a wonderful story. We'll stop here. We're so appreciative. It's such fun.

Laurie: It's fun for me, too, because this has been my baby for 31 years — well, it still is. I still own the property and the docks and the barge, and Bobby's bought the business. He's worked for me for over 25 years. He knows it inside and out and he's having a good time. I love it.